

AFFÄR

Andrew Lloyd-Jones

Anna was waiting beside the main entrance, smoking and watching children clamber over a yellow and blue jungle gym. She smiled and waved when she saw me walking towards her. She took a last drag on the cigarette before dropping it to the ground and extinguishing it with a swift turn of her heel, at the same time exhaling the smoke up and in the direction of the four giant capital letters that spelled out our destination's name.

I held her arm and kissed her lightly on each cheek.

"Am I late?" I asked, though I knew I was not.

"No," she said. "I just got here."

"Good," I said. "So, shall we?"

"Let's go," she said.

We made our way through the doors, stopping briefly to take a crinkled plastic carrier bag, together with a paper tape measure, bonsai pencil, and store

guide. All the while I was thinking about the way she smelled when she greeted me, the smoke from her cigarette mingling with the citrus scent of perfume too distinct to be anything other than recently applied.

We stood at the entrance to the showroom, a glowing white arrow on the floor urging us into the maze of home furnishings that lay beyond. From where we were standing, we could only see the first few room displays, but the extent of the showroom was clear from the ceiling, a white grid from which hung the store lighting and signage, and to which the partition walls of the rooms themselves were attached. It stretched away as far as we could see.

The displays nearest the start were living rooms, occasionally incorporating some kind of dining area. Each was dressed with everything you would expect from an ideal home—a perfectly coordinated, inviting mix of sofas, chairs, coffee tables, desks, picture frames, side tables, rugs, lamps, and soft lighting. Only the red and white information tags that dangled prominently from each item, from the candlesticks and table lamps to the mirrors and pictures on the wall, reminded us that everything we could see was, in fact, for sale.

“Welcome to IKEA,” I said.

It was Anna's first time. She looked at me and smiled as we walked into the showroom. I had been to IKEA before, many times, and so I knew the drill. Anna started as a polite onlooker, peering respectfully into each room, pausing occasionally to admire a sofa or a coffee table, but she quickly became a more familiar guest, inspecting cupboards and drawers, sitting on sofas and reclining in armchairs, putting her feet up on the clusters of coffee tables in between.

At first, I found myself looking deliberately at different parts of each room, occasionally catching Anna's eye, or glancing at her to smile, or raise an eyebrow, but soon I found myself by her side, discussing this corner unit, that set of storage jars, expressing preferences for such and such a color, this or that fabric, sitting together on sofas, picking out throws we liked, slowly building up the contents of a fantasy house.

After the living room, we moved into the kitchen section, leaning against countertops, sitting at breakfast bars, fiddling with fittings and storage jars. We talked about cooking; what we liked, what we didn't like, our favorite dishes: Anna, a beef and apple stew her mother had taught her to make when she was young; me, lasagna with ricotta and spinach, though I didn't tell her that for the past year I'd been subsisting on a diet of frozen meals and delivery pizzas. As we talked, we moved into the dining rooms, where we slowly circled a

dozen different tables set with plates, glasses, cutlery, each one casually elegant, selling the prospect of sparkling wit and flirtatious conversation in the soft lighting of some future dinner party.

Eventually, we made our way to the bedrooms. Like the living rooms, dining rooms, and kitchens, each one was different, with combinations of beds, cupboards and drawers in a variety of colors, materials and finishes, together with a range of soft furnishings, decorative accents, and lighting solutions.

We found ourselves in a corner unit, a chocolaty, softly lit scene suffused with browns and beiges, wooden shelves on the walls and a thick, wool throw folded on an ottoman at the foot of the bed. Anna lay down on the bed and looked up into the hollow ceiling.

I sat down on the opposite side of the bed and swung my legs up so I was lying beside her. We lay there for a minute, both of us staring up at the ceiling. I wondered how far away her hand was, whether she could feel the minute movements mine made on the duvet. Eventually, I turned my head to look at her, just in time to see her sit up and stand in one swift movement, then disappear into the en-suite bathroom on the other side of the bedroom. I followed her through the doorway into a small room with a toilet, twin basins beneath a large mirror, and a set of shelves filled with rattan baskets and piles of white

towels. She was standing in front of one of the basins, looking at her reflection. I stood beside her, staring first at myself, and then at her, before I turned and put my hand on her waist and pulled her towards me, her mouth already lifting up to mine, our IKEA bags rustling at our feet.

Afterwards, we walked through the storage, fabric, lighting, and children's areas hand in hand, veering off the path occasionally to kiss in a deserted aisle or display. Our conversation picked up where it had left off at dinner as we walked down into the marketplace, where we filled our bags with candles and plants pots and cushion covers and throws, each item magical and cheap and utterly irresistible, piles of everything you could ever need or want or think to have, stopping only when our bags became too heavy to carry.

We drifted through checkout on each other's arms, laughing and kissing as we went, stopping in the store cafe for hotdogs smeared with mustard and ketchup and cups of lingonberry juice to wash them down. We walked to Anna's car hand in hand, and she unlocked the door and threw in the bag before turning back to me.

"Can I see you again?" I asked.

"I don't know what we're doing," she said. "I would never do anything to hurt him."

“I know,” I said. “I want to see you again.”

“Yes,” she said.

And then she kissed me again, and I watched as she got into her car and started the engine and pulled out of the parking lot. I watched until her car had disappeared into the traffic, queues of people with affordable solutions and easy inspiration for their homes in flat-packed boxes and big blue bags, and then I turned and made my way to my car.

I had met Anna at the gym. We had chatted over smoothies, which became a coffee and a glass of wine at our next meeting, followed in turn by our afternoon at IKEA. Anna was from Ukraine, and was studying to be a dental hygienist, though she had originally trained as a jewelry designer. She kept an anatomical set of teeth in her handbag with which she had showed me the latest tooth brushing techniques.

Most of what I knew about her husband I learned from that first smoothie. He sold knee braces for a medical supply company, and clearly earned enough to afford what sounded like a decent-sized house in a nice part of town. But he was mentioned fewer times over the coffee, not once over the wine, and that day in IKEA he didn't come up at all.

I later found a few pictures of her husband online: behind the wheel of a car, taken from the passenger seat; in a park, at what looked like a picnic; at a wedding, in a light gray suit; asleep on a sun lounger with a book on his stomach in what I took to be their garden. Seeing him was strange—I felt no sense of competition or jealousy, just curiosity, as though they were images from a dream she had had and told me about when we woke, images that faded from my memory and eventually disappeared.

After that day in IKEA, we arranged to meet at my apartment. I'd been living there since I'd broken up with my girlfriend a year earlier. The only furniture I had was inherited from previous generations of tenants, a collection of mismatched and sagging items that combined to create what my landlord optimistically referred to as a furnished living space. It was possibly because of this that Anna and I broke one of the arms on my sofa when we had sex for the first time.

"You need a new sofa," Anna said afterwards.

"I know," I said.

"You need new everything," she said, looking around my room.

We spent the rest of that afternoon flicking through the pages of the IKEA catalogue, looking at dozens of more perfectly furnished rooms hinting at successful careers, fulfilling lives, promising futures, fond memories. Anna circled stock numbers and added asterisks to sofas, chairs, tables, and pillows. She knew what my apartment needed, she told me. And seeing Anna on the bed like that, I had to agree with her. She seemed to represent not just new furniture, but a whole new perspective. This was the kind of thing couples did in IKEA catalogues: they threw dinner parties, they had pillow fights, they lay around in underwear looking at IKEA catalogues. And so we arranged another visit.

This time, we met in the café. Anna brought her copy of the catalogue, which she'd bookmarked with more ideas for my apartment – beds, sofas, armchairs, tables, throws, pillows, and curtains. I wondered what her husband had thought of this.

The café was almost full, serving cheap bacon and eggs to sustain shoppers throughout the morning. On a table near ours was a group of men with full plates and cups of coffee. I had seen this before – builders who were only there for a cheap breakfast. They were in high spirits, laughing as they ate. One of

them was looking at Anna, and said something in what sounded like Russian, at which the others laughed.

Anna looked at me, clearly trying not to laugh herself.

“What?” I asked.

“They’re Polish,” said Anna.

“Builders,” I said.

“They’re talking about me,” she said.

“You speak Polish?” I asked.

“Yes,” she said. “They share some words with us, but I learned it at school.”

“What are they saying?” I said.

“They’re saying my ass looks good to eat.”

“Oh,” I said.

“What do you think?” she said.

We were having sex in the disabled bathroom beside the café five minutes later.

Afterwards, we headed back into the showroom, stepping into a river of couples which coursed through the aisles and paths. We drifted along with them, stopping occasionally to kiss in the doorway of another dream bedroom or kitchen or living room or study.

I had never paid much attention to the room displays in the past, seeing them as simply random collections of mostly things I didn't want or need. But with Anna, it all seemed different. Every room seemed to be the perfect combination of form and function, filled with ideas, possibilities, choices, and solutions. Anna talked about lighting, color schemes, and space efficiency, marking down stock numbers, dimensions, and prices, while I envisioned dinner parties, nights watching TV on the sofa, Sunday morning breakfasts in bed, passionate sex on an immaculate kitchen surface.

That day I bought a new bed, armchair, and sofa, which I arranged to be delivered, as well as a stack of curtains, rugs, pillows, candles and various other items from the marketplace, which would fit in my car. Back at my apartment, we ate gravlax and reindeer salami, and got drunk on boxes of elderflower cordial spiked with Aquavit. We lit vanilla-scented candles and undressed each other on my new SÖNDERÖD shag pile rug.

Anna came to my place once or twice a week after that, always during the day when her husband was at work, or on Sundays when he played golf. We would have sex, then she would sit on my sofa flicking through the pages of the IKEA catalogue, her hair in a bun held tight with an IKEA pencil, wrapped in a HJÄRTELIG mohair throw, while I prepared marinated herrings on rye

bread with slices of blueberry cake or whatever Scandinavian snacks we'd bought at the grocery section past the IKEA tills.

Because IKEA had been nothing short of a revelation for Anna. We visited on a regular basis, building on the purchases I'd already made—adding bookshelves, lighting, picture frames, a dining table and chairs, wardrobes, bathroom cabinets. She loved wandering through the showroom, finding new treasures in the aisles, marrying one item to another to create something entirely new. Everything about IKEA excited her. We would kiss beneath the dangling price tags, and she would whisper what she wanted to do to me on my BRIMNES bed when we got home, or, on one occasion, on a pile of FJÄDRAR cushions in the back seat of my car in the parking lot.

Each purchase brought me a step closer to Scandinavian perfection. Assembling a flat-pack chair was both an achievement and a reward; we would invariably have sex in, on, or with whatever we had just put together. IKEA had become our second language. We knew each of the pieces by name, could tell a YPPERLIG from a STORNÄS, a LANGESUND from an ISFJORDEN. Anything worth having in my apartment had a Scandinavian translation. Anna's breasts were LÖVA. Her pussy was NEXUS. My cock was IVAR. When we fucked, it was VARDE. We burned through hundreds of vanilla scented tea

lights, in the bedroom, the kitchen, the lounge, the bathroom. My bedsheets were permanently stained with lingonberry juice.

Over the weeks and months that followed, with Anna's help my apartment turned from a dingy one bedroom to a fully realized living-slash-sleeping-slash-working-slash-entertaining space. Each room could have passed for one of the displays at IKEA, save for the lack of dangling price tags. Anything that wasn't on display was ingeniously stored away: IKEA offered dozens of ways to make the quotidian clutter of my life disappear, carefully filed and shelved and stacked and drawered. Everything had a home. My life was beautifully contained.

When a new IKEA catalogue arrived in the mail, I opened it with a sense of eager anticipation. My apartment was by now perfect as far as I was concerned, but I knew Anna would want to see whatever new items had come into stock as soon as possible. Sex was never so good as when we had just assembled a new piece of furniture. I presented her with the catalogue the next day.

"What do you think?" I asked. "Shall we go on Sunday?"

She smiled, taking the catalogue and sitting down with it on my EKTORP sofa, flicking through the pages, though with none of the intense scrutiny she had given the previous one.

“What’s the matter?” I asked.

“I can’t do Sunday,” she said.

“Why not,” I said.

She closed the catalogue and laid it gently on my STOCKHOLM coffee table.

“I’m doing something with him,” she said.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“We’re going to IKEA,” she said.

“You’re going to IKEA,” I said.

“We got the new catalogue too,” she said. “He said he wanted to go on Sunday.”

My living room, just like all my rooms, looked just like a scene in the IKEA catalogue. The furniture, the rugs, the curtains, the cushions, the candles, the lighting—everything was in place, beautifully composed and ideally imagined. Everything was how it was meant to be. But I’d never seen a picture of a girl on a sofa with her head in her hands while a man stood over her, looking at

the floor. And even though I'd only given it a cursory glance, I was sure this picture wasn't in the new catalogue either.

"Does he know?" I asked.

"I don't know," she said.

It was more than we'd talked about her husband in months. He was always there, of course, but if we never spoke about him, it was like he didn't exist. She had told me he hated IKEA, and they had never gone together. I didn't ask what their house was like. I didn't ask whether they slept together. I didn't ask what he thought when his wife came home smelling of elderflower juice and cured fish.

We spent the rest of the afternoon together not talking about her husband. We had sex on the sofa, watched a movie on TV, and then she left. We didn't talk about IKEA either.

I was at IKEA when they opened the doors on Sunday morning, having parked at the top of the parking garage, which rarely filled. I waited for them in the café, which overlooked the escalators leading up to the showroom. I had read the new catalogue cover to cover and was on my third cup of coffee by the time they arrived.

Her husband looked both older and heavier than he did in the photos I had seen. He was holding a copy of the new catalogue, and wearing chinos, a grey shirt, and a dark blue sweater vest, and if it had been September I'd have taken him for a father buying furniture for his daughter's first college dorm. Anna stood two steps behind him, wearing black leggings and a gray vest top, neither of which I recognized, and had a black leather handbag slung over her shoulder, which I last remembered noticing on the floor next to my bed. I let them walk into the showroom before I followed.

Being a Sunday, IKEA was busy, but they stuck to the path without entering any of the display rooms, so it was relatively easy to keep track of their movements. They would pause occasionally on the edge of a display, or by a collection of cabinets or wardrobes, and I could see her husband consulting his catalogue. They spoke to each other every now and again, though I was too far away to hear what they were saying. There was no sign of any tension between them; they looked just like any other couple in IKEA.

I watched as they stopped by a collection of armchairs on the inner circuit of the showroom. He sat down in one, bounced himself on it gently, and then moved on to another. He did this with five different armchairs, including one

I had in my apartment at home. Anna stood there and watched him. Eventually, she too sat down on the one that he seemed to indicate a preference for, JÄPPLING, and looked up at him, nodding. He wrote something down in the catalogue, and then they moved on.

Though I was careful to keep my distance, I ducked into the display rooms every now and again to make sure I wasn't seen. The rooms had changed since my last visit. This time, they were unfamiliar, containing updated items of furniture, with strange names, and different colors and textures, emphasized with harsh lighting. Whereas before I could easily navigate my way through the showroom by the look and feel of the rooms, now I found it hard to get my bearings, confused by the unexpected newness of it all. Other couples moved in and out, judging, critical, in a hurry. I missed the old rooms, our rooms. Here, I was just in the way. Standing in someone else's bedroom, kitchen, living room, bathroom, I felt like an intruder.

I followed them through the rest of the showroom, through the kitchen units and bedframes and bedside tables and sofas and entertainment centers and desks and drawers, as they inspected and tested the furniture. They eventually walked through the children's area without pausing, and headed down into the Marketplace.

I followed them to the top of the stairs, and when I looked down, Anna was at the bottom, looking up at me. She didn't look surprised to see me; she just looked sad and tired and worn out, like any other shopper in IKEA. She simply shook her head, and then rounded the corner out of sight. I stood a while at the top of the stairs and decided to leave. There was nothing else I needed.

We didn't talk for a few days after that, and then I received a text from Anna asking if we could meet. I suggested the IKEA café the following weekend, and she agreed. When I got there, she was already waiting for me at a table, stirring a cup of coffee. As usual, it was busy, the regular crowd of families and couples, and once again, a group of builders with loaded breakfast trays at the table beside us.

"How've you been?" I asked.

"Good," she said.

"Good," I said.

"How's the apartment?" she asked.

"Good," I said.

"Good," she said.

IKEA clattered on around us, a background of constant movement and noise. Customers ate, rattling forks on plates and spoons in mugs and trays on tables, while music echoed over the PA system, interrupted by the occasional announcement of store specials that day. Anna stirred her coffee, watching it swirl round in the cup in silence.

“So, did you buy that armchair?” I asked.

She shook her head, and when she looked up at me there were tears in her eyes.

“I can’t do this anymore,” she said.

“Why?” I asked.

“Because it’s not right,” she said.

“Why now?” I asked. “Does he know?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “But he loves me.”

“Do you love him?”

“Yes,” she said.

“Are you in love with him?” I said.

“I love him,” she said.

There was another announcement over the store radio, this one a special on office storage. The builders were talking about something in what sounded

like the same language as before, laughing between mouthfuls of bacon and eggs, pieces of which flecked onto the melamine surface of the tables as they ate. Anna turned her head towards them, looking anywhere but at me.

“I know you’re not happy,” I said.

“It’s not like that,” she said.

“Then what is it like?” I asked.

“I know how to be lonely,” she said after a moment. “But I don’t know how to do this.”

A builder beside us said something, and the others at his table roared their approval. She turned her head briefly, and then looked back at me.

“What did he say?” I asked.

“Nothing,” she said.

“What was it?” I said.

“It wasn’t anything,” she said.

I looked over at the builders, still laughing and shoveling food into their mouths. Then I stood up.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“I’m going to speak to them,” I said.

“Don’t be stupid,” she said.

I shrugged and pushed back my chair, walking past Anna towards the builders' table. The man who had been talking still had food in his mouth when I punched him. He jerked back in his seat, but the punch wasn't strong enough to knock him to the floor, even though I was standing over him. He held his hands up towards me, pushing me away as I went in for another swing. Then he grabbed my arms and I moved closer to him and we both somehow fell to the floor, struggling, each of us trying to pull our fists back far enough to punch with any force. Someone grabbed me from behind, pulling me back, giving him enough clearance to follow through. I felt three, maybe four blows, to my face, my stomach, my chest, before he, too, was pulled away. I drew breath, feeling a sharp pain in my nose and a wetness around my mouth, and I could hear Anna yelling something in Polish, or maybe Ukrainian, in the background. I became aware I was lying alone in the space cleared by tables and chairs shifting as we had rolled about on the floor.

Above me a sign swung back and forth from the ceiling. The ceiling was the same grid of wood, beyond which I could see a tangle of wires and ducts and brackets and pipes, the messy guts of the store, fixed to a plain concrete roof. I realized that I recognized the chairs we had been sitting on, as well as

the tables we had been sitting at. They were all available for sale in the warehouse. The chairs were INGOLF.

Someone somewhere asked me how I was, and I told them I was fine. I wiped my nose and there was blood on my fingers when I looked at them. My hand was shaking. A few tables away, I could see the builder and his friends standing with someone from IKEA, all talking at once. One of them pointed at me, and I held my hand up and nodded my head in what I intended as an apology. Amongst a crowd that had gathered several people were taking photos with their phones: a man on the floor with his head between his knees, sitting amongst broken plates and trays and upturned chairs. I looked around for Anna, but she had gone.

It was a stupid way to end things. I wanted to tell them that I was sorry, for all of this. That I was a good customer, that my apartment was filled with IKEA furnishings, fixtures, fittings. I knew it wouldn't make a difference, and I realized I didn't care much either. None of it seemed worth anything at that moment. None of these things were meant to last. Nothing from IKEA was ever included in a will.

Andrew Lloyd-Jones was born in London, England and grew up in Anchorage, Alaska. He won the Fish Prize with his story “Feathers and Cigarettes”, and his writing has featured in *Parhelion Literary Magazine*, *Popshot Quarterly*, *Blue Lake Review*, *The London Reader*, and in the Canongate collection *Original Sins*, amongst others. Andrew produces and hosts Liars’ League NYC (www.liarsleaguenyc.com), a regular New York-based live literary journal and podcast, showcasing original short fiction from emerging writers.